

## Relaxation Exercise: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Tense muscles are a common reaction to stress. Indeed, many people experience some tension in the neck and shoulders in a normal workday. Progressive muscle relaxation can help with stress and tension. It involves tensing and relaxing the muscles in your body, one muscle group at a time. It can also reduce other reactions to stress, such as rapid breathing and heartbeat, stomach problems, and headache.<sup>1</sup>

*Please note: Throughout this exercise, don't continue any movement if it causes you pain. Be cautious about stretching or tensing parts of your body that have caused you past problems (for example - a bad back, neck, leg, or arm). If you're not sure if it's safe to do any part of this exercise because of injuries, it's best not to try. Consult your doctor first.*

### Relax in 10 minutes

Allow yourself at least about 10 minutes to do this exercise.

#### **Here's how:**

- A. Find a quiet, comfortable place. You can do this exercise in a chair or lying down.
- B. Close your eyes, if you're comfortable doing so. However, if you have experienced traumatic stressors, you may want to keep them open. This can help you stay "grounded" in the "here and now." Do what's most comfortable for you.
- C. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Now, follow these steps:
  - Inhale deeply through your nose with your mouth closed to a count of four.
  - Exhale through your mouth slowly - also to a count four. On the exhale, imagine that the tension leaving your body, flowing out with each exhale.
  - Repeat this three to four times. If at any point you feel dizzy or light-headed, return to your normal breathing.
  - Continue to breathe deeply as you move into the muscle tension and relaxation part of this exercise. You will begin with your feet and work your way up. As you inhale, tense and hold each muscle for a count of four. Relax that muscle group as you breathe out. Take several breaths before you move to the next part of your body. Allow some time to feel the relaxation.
  - Tense the muscles of your feet by pointing your toes and tightening your feet as you inhale. Hold this tension briefly, then relax your toes and feet as you breathe

out. Imagine the tension flowing out with your breath. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation.

- Press the balls of your feet into the floor and raise your heels, allowing your calf muscles to contract. Feel the tension in your calves for a moment. Then release and notice your muscles relax. Again, have the tension and relaxation match your breath. Tighten your knees and allow your legs to straighten. Feel the tightness in the front of your legs. Notice the sense of tension as you inhale. And release on the exhale, allowing your legs to bend and relax back onto the floor.
- Squeeze the muscles of your buttocks. Notice the feeling of tension as you inhale. Hold this for just a moment. And on your exhale, release and allow your muscles to relax, letting the tension melt away.
- Continue up through your body. Concentrate now on your stomach. Contract your stomach and continue to breathe. Hold the tension for a count of four. Inhale deeply. As you exhale, let your stomach relax. Again, notice the difference the tension and relaxation.
- Move your attention now to your hands. Curl your fingers into a tight fist in each hand. Hold your fists tight and notice the sense of tension as you continue to breathe. As you release your fists, let your hands relax back to a natural position. And notice the difference between the feeling of tension and relaxation in your hands.
- Bend both arms now at the elbow (like Popeye). Flex both of your arms by making fists and pulling your fists up tightly to your shoulders. Notice the feeling in the tensed muscles of your upper arms. Take another inhale and as you exhale and relax your arms down to your sides. Take notice of any change in what you feel as you go from a state of tension to relaxation.
- Push your shoulders up to your ears now. Hold this “shrugging” position for just a moment. Feel the tension in your neck and shoulder muscles. Feel the tension melt away as you relax your shoulders back down. Continue to breathe in and out.
- Finish by tensing the muscles in your face. Scrunch your face as if you just bit into something sour. Feel your eyebrows pull together, your eyes pinch tightly shut, and your lips purse together. Notice the sensation of tenseness in your face for just a moment. Then allow your face to relax. Notice the release of tension from your forehead, eyes, cheeks, mouth and jaw.
- See if you can find any other spot of tension in your body. Notice it and let it go.

- Let yourself be still for a few moments. Just experience your relaxed muscles. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply. Feel any tension flow out. Your relaxation can get deeper with each breath.

When you're ready, bring your attention back to your breathing. Notice your body and how it feels. If you've had your eyes closed, imagine the room. When you're ready, open your eyes.

### Practice, practice, practice

Done regularly, this exercise can train your body to know the difference between tension and relaxation. This can help you reduce muscle tension and manage stress and anxiety. Take time for a session whenever you begin to feel stressed out. For example, if you work at a desk, you can do a mini-relaxation on the muscles you use in your work, such as the neck and shoulders. Make progressive muscle relaxation or other stress-reducing techniques, such as meditation and deep breathing, a part of your daily routine.

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